histories

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Cultural Contacts among Pre-Roman Peoples in Iron Age Italy: The Case of Venetic Inscriptions

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Abstract: The spread of the alphabet in Italy occurred between the 7th and the 6th centuries BC, resulting in the appearance of texts written in so many different languages and in such limited territorial space that one can hardly observe another similar event (Venetic, Raetic, Etruscan, Picenian, Faliscan, Latin, Umbrian, Oscan, Greek, etc.). In this paper, we analyzed inscriptions produced by the Veneti, the ancient inhabitants of a region located between the Adriatic Sea and the Alps, which has provided mainly short sepulchral and votive texts. After a careful analysis, some so far poorly understood texts revealed the development of symbols to represent numbers and the measurement of time. These features are connected with the experience of the Etruscans and show characteristics shared with neighboring Celtic populations. The inscriptions also highlight a focus on the supernatural and the underworld. Cultural influences from the east, especially from Egypt, which represent a prominent moment in the evolution of Greece in the 7th century BC, have left traces in figurative culture and, quite unexpectedly, even in language. Rigorous transliterations and original interpretations of the analyzed inscriptions support the proposed results.

1. Introduction

Archaeological investigations in Este since the second half of the 19th century have provided significant evidence of inscriptions in the Venetic language, with important findings that continue to this day (De Min 1989; Gambacurta and Marinetti 2021). These texts triggered a debate on pre-Latin Italic languages and laid the foundations for the systematic study of the epigraphy of the Venetic language, which achieved a structured development in the book *Manuel de la langue Vénète* by Michel Lejeune (Lejeune 1974), a milestone on the subject.

The Venetic inscriptions belong mainly to the area overlooking the Gulf of the Adriatic Sea, the *Sinus Adriaticus*, roughly located among the river Adige (south), the Berici Hills and the Pre-Alps of Vicenza (northwest), the mountains of Cadore and the river Tagliamento (in the north and east, respectively).

This study analyzes and assesses two relevant sources (and related theoretical positions), and proposes alternative meanings for the texts. The first interpretation is inherent in the word *ansores*, generally considered a descriptive term for public figures in Venetic society (Lejeune 1974). The second interpretation tries to find a new direction for the restitution of the term *ekupetaris*, which Lejeune considers as an expression of a social role, equivalent to Latin *equitalis*, or as an indicator of the rank of a character mentioned in the epigraphic record (Lejeune 1971).

Language contact phenomena confirm that these borders, which were not always well defined over time, were points of cultural osmosis with Greek and Etruscan peoples at the *emporia* of Adria and Spina, with Celtic tribes coming from the plain of Verona, with the

Raetian language attested along the edge of the Pre-Alps (Raetian sanctuaries of Trissino and Magrè) up to Feltre, and with other Celtic populations from the *Caput Adriae* region in the western areas of the Friuli region.

The Venetic alphabet is attested since the 6th century BC and uses, with some adaptations, Greek alphabetic characters borrowed from the Etruscans of southern Etruria; it was continued until the 1st century BC, to be gradually replaced by the Latin alphabet and language.

The inscriptions are evidence of the relationships among the above mentioned peoples, consistent with what has already been shown through archaeology: significant details emerged also from the presence of prominent figures from Venetic society who had names influenced by Celtic (*Andetico*, *Katusio*), or by Latin and Etruscan (*Voltiommno*, similar to Voltumnus and Veltune), Greek (*Graikoi*, *Okialo*, *Ebos*), Picenian (*Pupone* in Venetic and *Pupunu* in Picenian), or from loanwords, such as the Etruscan personal pronoun *mi* in inscriptions from Adria, or the Venetic noun *aisun* from Cadore, comparable to Raetic/Etruscan *aiser*, defining 'gods'.

The aim of this study is to highlight the relevance of cultural exchanges in the area under investigation with the support of an original interpretation of some local inscriptions. In our article, the new interpretations of single words we propose are hypotheses aimed at triggering a possibly fruitful debate, while the novel contents in themselves are the analysis of numerals and the depiction of their representations and functions in short texts, which are elements still in need of more comprehensive studies in this context (Mancini 2023). Moreover, we introduce an interpretation according to which, in tombs and sanctuaries, frequent references to deities should be expected, rather than definitions of social aspects and social classes of local communities. This point is closely related, in our tentative reconstruction, to the proposed symbolic and supernatural value of the horse.

Nothing in our proposal is stated or presented as an incontrovertible 'truth'. As mentioned, indeed, this paper aims at ingenerating a new discussion in a panorama of studies which currently looks a repetition of previous assertions and wrapped up in interpretations which are commonly accepted as 'final', while they would require more analysis and evidence which has not been found nor shown, so far. To the scholars who will not agree with our conclusions (their points of view will always have our utmost respect), we ask you to deal with our interpretation with an open mind and to consider that the goal of our research is to advance, through discussions and by sharing opinions, our knowledge inherently in the contents of the Venetic inscriptions, rather than starting sterile and unwanted controversies.

2. Literature Review and Methods

Most of the texts are short funerary epigraphs and votive inscriptions, with repetitive patterns and a clear prevalence of onomastic forms. The deities appear to be different from the ones from Greek and Roman mythology; rather than through proper nouns, they are indicated using epithets, possibly to preserve the ineffability of the divine context. In addition, the Veneti in the pre-Roman period rarely represented their gods with a well-defined human/anthropomorphic aspect. Their deities, conversely, look like presences that animate nature and objects. This recalls a testimony by Diodorus Siculus: Celts who occupied the Delphi sanctuary were surprised to see Greek goods represented with statues (Brunaux 2016).

So far, only a single extended Venetic text is available, a supposedly public document called 'Este's Table'. It contains an inscription on a bronze plate found at Este, one of the major Venetic urban settlements, which adopts alphabetical variants characteristic of the antagonist city of Padua (Lomas 2017). The text is written in *scriptio continua*, with breaks among paragraphs. The surviving plate is only a part of the original; unfortunately, it shows gaps in several sections. The text develops in the shape of a spiral, from the contour to the center, like in a funerary gravestone from Altino (Prosdocimi 1972). Despite the numerous interruptions, the text represents an unexpected source of linguistic references,

which has provided us with valuable support for some of the interpretations proposed in this work.

The discovery of several inscriptions in the last two decades of the 20th century has broadened and completed the understanding of the contents, although some official interpretations have remained unchanged since the ones listed by Michel Lejeune (Lejeune 1974).

The Venetic script borrowed from Etruscan (ca. 5th century BC) a technique of notation called punctuation: letters in syllables different from the CV sequence are evidenced with dots. While the Etruscans adopted punctuation for a little more than a century, the Veneti preserved it until the disappearance of their writing system. This extreme conservatism of the grammatological formalism is coherent with an elitist use of the written language and the adoption of repetitive patterns in the development of inscriptions.

The first indispensable step to approach the text is the correct identification of the characters and the segmentation of the possible words in the *scriptio continua*. After this, a comparative approach (at the linguistic and grammatological level) with texts from other contemporary languages is applied, to help formulate interpretations at the semantic level. Improbable solutions are excluded, and only the most plausible set of results is taken into account for further analysis. In this paper, therefore, our linguistic and philological approach is always corroborated using the investigation of the relevant historical contexts, with specific attention devoted to quite recent contributions and discoveries from the field of archeology (Brunaux 2016).

Our approach, therefore, would aim to ideally overcome all possible interpretation biases, constraints, and ideological 'restrictions' to pave a way for an 'all-embracing', clear, reasonable, and respectful proposal of reconstruction which is open to improvements and discussion, and which takes into account cultural contacts and language contact in and from the Mediterranean, in a context that connected, through travels, trade, and interexchange, Ancient Greece, near East, and northern Africa with southern, central, and northern Italy.

3. The Ansores

The first text analyzed here comes from a mountain sanctuary, near Lagole, in the upper valley of the Piave, in the Cadore region, the ancient *Catubrigium*, where place names and archeological findings confirm a Celtic influence (Pellegrini 1975). The presence of springs of sulphureous water, with healing effects, was decisive in the establishment of a sacred location where devotees buried votive offerings, some of them with inscriptions. We consider, here, the inscription Ca24, with "Ca" corresponding to "Cadore", the place where the document was found, in accordance with the notation provided by Pellegrini and Prosdocimi (1967). The inscription contains the supposed name *ansores*, a *hapax legomenon*, written on a well-preserved heavy bronze handle, which was part of a *simpulum*, a ritual ladle used for libations or to pour water with healing powers. This artifact has, on one side, a well-understood text with continuous script from right to left (Lejeune 1952, 1974). For clarity, we reproduce the text with the right *cursus*; the first line states the following:

turiconei.okicai.co.i.e.φos.kea.lerou.teu.ta[..

Turijonei Okijaijoi Ebos ke Alero u teuta(m)

The text starts with two nouns in the dative singular case: they represent the name of the person to whom the offer is made. Then, we find two other names coordinated by the conjunction *ke* and we see the preposition *u*, which requires the accusative and indicates the 'quality' of the action, and, finally, the name *teuta*.

The handle of the *simpulum* has been separated from the collection cup in the ritual break that de-functionalizes a votive offering, so it might have lost a letter *m* that we would expect for the accusative form *teutam*.

The proposed translation is "For Turione Okiaio, Ebos and Alero by the community". The term *Okiaio* shows a remarkable affinity with Greek ὠκύ-ᾰλος, *Okyalos*, a proper noun attested in the *Odyssey*. In Greek, it is a "speaking name", which means "fast on the sea water" (*Oky + als*). *Ebos* appears with the ending *-bos* of some Venetic datives, but is more

probably a nominative in *-os*, similar to the Greek term *ἤβος*, *ebos* = 'mature'. *Teuta* is the Indo-European name of the community, attested in different Italic languages: *tuta* in Umbria, *τωϝτο* in Oscan, *tuthi* (a loanword?) in Etruscan, *τευτά* in Greek, *teuta* in Latin, and the goddess *Teutates* in Celtic.

On the opposite side of the handle, it is possible to find an inscription from which scholars have identified only two names and which is considered largely unintelligible. The initial word is read *ansores*, presumably a plural nominative, traced back to the two authors of the offer, Ebos and Alero. A wide debate originated on the etymology of *ansores*, also inherently in the question about what public function the term would indicate ([Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967](); [Lejeune 1974]()). The group of five letters after *ansores* is not understood, unfortunately.

We move on, now, to the next three letters, which are supposed to be an abbreviated form of the verb of offer *kvidor*, according to the phrase *kvidor donom*, 'offer a gift', equivalent to *doto donom*. Other parts that are not yet understood follow.

The actual analysis begins with the identification of all the letters or symbols: we recognize characters of the standard alphabet in the variant in use at Lagole, with the exception of a little-known version of the Etruscan zed utilized in the Cadore inscription.

This part of the document shows spaces in the original text, differently from the previous line:

(Venetic inscription)

an.ṡores. ssiis kvi zutuc ti[..

anṡ ores SSIIS qui dutuj ti[. . . or *an iores* (?). . .

Here, we consider the de-composition of *anśores* after the letter *san*, although this hypothesis contrasts with the punctuation found in the text, which suggests a connection between *ś* and *o*. However, both the direct observation of the texts and an observation by Lejeune confirmed that the punctuation in the inscriptions of Lagole "is not always that exact and complete" ([Lejeune 1974](), p. 279). To complete the range of options, it is necessary to highlight that it is even possible (albeit this is quite unlikely) that the specific letter is not a *san*, but an *i*.

The group of five letters following *anśores* contains three *s* characters and two *i* characters in a sequence that is phonetically inappropriate in word composition. The sequence, therefore, seems more likely to be a set of symbols and it is easy to interpret it as a number: in an inscription on a votive object devoted to a person, *Turione*, a number could be the date of the offer or the age of the beneficiary, or both (the date related to the birth of the subject). In that case, we would expect a value between 20 and 60 years, the adulthood of a person, in which it is reasonable to postulate that the individual might have accomplished significant actions, to deserve recognition by the community.

The Etruscan letter *t*, similar to our *X* and pronounced in Padua like /d/, is assumed to indicate the number 'ten' by analogy with the text of the 'Este Table' *dekomei*, and because of its presence in other inscriptions which might contain numbers, e.g., Ca4 ([Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967]()). Therefore, the letter *s*, if it is a number, should represent another numerical quantity.

In Roman counting, the symbols after 10 (*X*) are 50 (*L*) and 100 (*C*), values which are possibly too high for the signs of the inscription. A similarity can be postulated with Celtic numbering, characterized by a base-twenty system that survived partially in modern French (*quatre-vingt* = $4 \times 20 = 80$) and in the English word *score* (Old English *scoru* = 'twenty'). We propose, hence, that this *s* could indicate the number 20, with the Roman pattern according to which lower ante-posed digits are subtracted from a higher digit. In that case, the text would represent $20 + 20 + 20 - 2$, or 58, as an indication of age.

The Veneti adopted from the Etruscans not only the alphabet, but also numerical symbols, such as the letter *chi* Ψ for 50 (Marchesini 2013). If that was the case, the letter *s* could derive from a Venetic adaptation of the Etruscan 20, *zathrum*, or from a Venetic word that we have lost.

In modern European languages we have the word *snes* for 20 in Norwegian and the above mentioned Old English term *score*. It looks like Venetic and Germanic languages show traces of an ancestral base-twenty numbering system, but we do not know whether this could have a common origin or was introduced independently.

This hypothesis raises many questions on the role of twenty-based counting in Europe in the 1st millennium BC: was it used only in marginal areas, such as the Alpine valleys? Was it a remnant feature of pre-Indo-European populations that survived in isolated territories (Basque had a twenty-based numbering system, for example)?

The Etruscan symbol for '10', *śar*, was *X* and, in the northern Etruscan alphabet, the *san* letter was noted as *S, not M* as in the southern alphabet; however, only one possible piece of Etruscan evidence of *S* to represent '10' is attested. If, in any case, that was the specific case, the inscription would indicate a value of $10 + 10 + 10 - 2 = 28$, which is still acceptable in this context. Whatever the answer might be, this inscription is not the only one containing the symbol *s*.

In the *simpulum* from Lagole, the text preceding the number 58 is now clear. The formula *op iorobos* appears in inscriptions from Este (Es23 and Es69). The preposition *op* could be connected with the Greek *opi* (ὄπι), while *iorobos* might be an ablative of *ioros*, related to the Indo-European root **hei-* (Pokorny 1959, p. 489), and the Proto-Germanic root **ioh$_1$-reh$_2$*. The original meaning of the root **hei-* indicates a range of time per year or per month, or 'daytime' (Pokorny 1959). In Old German, *jar* means 'year', while in Latin the word *hora* indicates the subdivision into 12 parts of day and night. The root can also indicate the concept of 'season', a subdivision of the calendar of the year. Some authors (e.g., Mastrocinque 1987) speculate that *op iorobos* would be an expression of gratitude for the seasonal fruits. We propose, conversely, the translation "for the (past) years", a simple, ritual sentence in an offering to thank a deity. Just at the indicative level, and to keep open the full range of theoretical options, if we consider the Latin adjective *perennis*, meaning 'perennial', structured as '*per annos*', we can even postulate that the Venetic expression *op iorobos* could be a wish for a perennial effect of the offer.

The variant *ores*, found in Lagole's text, actually requires an apheresis: *iores > ores*. On the specific meaning, we consider that in Greek, in addition to the word ὦρως, *-ου*, *horos*, indicating 'year', we can find ὦρα, *hora*, and the Ionic version ὦρη, *hore*, which mean 'season' and 'sub-division of time'. The Venetic preposition *ans* is comparable to Greek ἕνς, which in turn is a preposition indicating time (+ accusative). The meaning could, therefore, be "...to years 58"/"...58 years of age" (or "...years 28").

To further support the hypothesis of the apheresis, it should be noted that the word *or(es)* could be read in the inscription Ag1 from Agordo (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967), part of a group of two epigraphs on a boundary marker which seems to be a re-used funerary slab, similar to those utilized as tombstones. The inscription we analyzed extends over two lines, and the first one is as follows:

]nicokapro.s.o.r[

]nijo kapros or

It contains a binomial onomastic form, A?*]nio Kapros*, and the word *or*.
The following line contains the symbols

X Ψ II

In Etruscan, the letter *chi*, Ψ , corresponds numerically to 50; we can assume that the Etruscan letter *t*, or *X* in Venetic, had a value of 10 and a value of 1 was ascribed to the letter *i*, like in Roman counting. It this is correct, for this line we would be able to postulate the operation $50 - 10 + 2 = 42$.

The inscription would indicate, therefore, "]nio Kapros, of years 42 (42 years old)". A similar representation is findable in the inscription Ca17 (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967):

φuticako.s[ ]kos ⋁ ⋁

Butijakos . . .kos ⋁ ⋁

Here, the two symbols ⋁ ⋁ after the text represent 50 followed by 5, and they indicate the age of the deceased, called with the binomial formula *Butiakos [ ]kos of years (50 + 5 =) 55*.

Additionally, the inscription Es7 (from a pillar found in Caldevigo, near Este) shows the numerical indication of age:

.]e.gora.i.teviio.i./lo.r. XX

ego Raitevioi/ior XX

The letter before *or* is believed to have been misidentified (Lejeune 1974, p. 216); the original inscription is not available for verification. Like in the previous epigraphs from Este with *op iorobos*, the form adopted for 'years' is *ior*. We read, therefore: "I (am) for Raitevio (deceased) at 20 years (when he was 20 years old)".

The use in Este of the double Etruscan *t* instead of the *s* from Lagole for the value of 20 might be due to the local features of the Venetic language: this would indicate the existence of a base-ten counting system at Este and a base-twenty one at Lagole, which may derive from a Celtic influence.

We also postulate a similar reference to *iores* in a bronze statue from Lagole, Ca23, representing a warrior with a helm, with the following inscription (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967):

broi.coko.s.zono.m.zotosa.i.nate.i/trumusicate.i/tir

Broijokos donom doto Sainatei/Trumisijatei/X ir

Scholars considered the final part of the text, *tir*, as a 'lapsus' by the writer (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967, p. 510); we propose to interpret *X* as 'ten' and *ir* as an epigraphic abbreviation for *iores*.

If that was the case, we would have, as a gloss, "ten years". This could indicate the age of the boy represented as a warrior or the time elapsed since an event of recovery and/or healing at the origin of the offer.

"*Broikos* gave an offer to *Sainate Trumusiate* (at/after) ten years"

Getting back to the analysis of the inscription on the ladle from Lagole, with the support of the 'Este Table' we can see that the Venetic indicates the month of a date with a cardinal number in full text, not through a numerical symbol as in the Roman fashion. The word *kvi* of the inscription could, therefore, represent an abbreviation of *kvito*, 'fifth', similar to *quintus* in Latin, referring to the number of the month.

Another inscription from Este contains *kvi*, interpreted as *quito*, meaning *quintus* (Lejeune 1974, p. 230). It seems, therefore, that the offer of Lagole was completed in the fifth month of the year, July, of the 58th year of Turione.

After the indication of the month, the form *dutui* appears as a verb indicating 'donation', a variant of *doto*, 'to give'.

At the level of alternative interpretation, *kvi* could be combined with the letters which follow, to obtain *kvidu*, and represent the verb *kvidor*, meaning 'to offer'. The verb should be *kvidu*, and *tuj* should be a number, 10 + 5 + 1/2. Through this interpretation, we would get a date with the year, month, and number of days, but it is necessary to highlight the fact that the second line of the inscription does not show the continuous script of the first line, and the spaces among the symbols could be used intentionally to separate the text from the numbers. According to this perspective, indeed, the separation of *dutuj* would be very unlikely.

The final part of the inscription, *ti[.*, which ends at the physical point of ritual detachment of the *simpulum* handle, may be an abbreviated form. We propose a contextualization with respect to other inscriptions from Lagole: there are, indeed, other examples at the end of the texts that can be interpreted as *ti*, or its variant *di* (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967):

Ca67 **IIXI** can be read *2 ti* or *iiti*,

Ca68 **di** is the final text,

Ca64 the symbol **IIIXI** can be read *3 ti*

ti/di might be abbreviations to indicate the word 'day', by analogy with *diei* on the 'Este Table'. Alternatively, they could represent the construct 'number + *ti*', or a ritual invocation.

We underline that, compared to the components expected in a votive inscription, we have not met a reference to the deity to whom the offer is addressed yet, and for this reason *ti* should be the expected reference to the recipient god or goddess.

The following is from the inscription Vi2 (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967):

.o.s..t..s.katus.ia.i.io.s.todan.s.to.a.tra.e..s.te.r.mon.io.s.te.i.vo.s.

Osts Katusios donasto atraes Termonios Deivos

We know that in Venetic the word for deity is *deivos* (accusative plural, according to the gift + accusative scheme of the recipient, as an alternative to the dative), while in the Lagole inscription there might be a reference to a term more similar to *divus*, or the Latin *Dite* (*Dis*), the Greek *Θιός* (*θεός*), or the *Tyr* of the Germanic peoples. A Celtic influence is possible, as Caesar wrote that all Celts declared to be descendants from *Dis Pater* (*De bello gallico*, 6-18 . . .*ab Dite patre*. . .). The phonological similarity of the words for 'day' and 'god', in Latin *dies* and *divus*, is not accidental. Both terms, indeed, originally come from the concepts of 'bright', 'heavenly', connected with the notion of 'day' and with the Indo-European generic name of a deity (Pokorny 1959, p. 551).

Indeed, even the name of the main god of the Etruscans, compatible with a major deity of the Raeti attested in the Alpine area near Lagole, *Tinia*, could be connected with the word *tin*, 'day'.

It is also possible to note that the Etruscan *t*, which appears twice in the 'Este Table', between 'phrase separators' (Marinetti 1998, 1999, p. 414), could represent an invocation to the deity, since the text, despite its possible secular content, shows references to religious rituals.

To sum up, the second part of the inscription from Lagole could be translated as "in July of the year 58 (since the birth of Turione, Ebos, and Alero) offered (this) to the deity".

The presence, in the inscriptions Ca64 and Ca67, of the numbers two and three before *ti* might be an equivalent of the Etruscan and Raetian ritual formula *ci aiser* = 'three deities' (Marchesini and Roncador 2016), or another form of invocation.

4. Ekupetaris

While the interpretation of the word *ansores* explained by Lejeune (1974) was traditionally preserved, another term raises questions. We are talking about the form *ekupetaris* and its variants, *eppetaris* and *ekvopetaris*. Despite many interpretative issues and the recurring appearance of new proposals (Zavaroni 2007; Lejeune 1971; Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967), most scholars agree with Lejeune, who sees the term as an indicator of the social class of the 'knights', equivalent to the Latin *equitalis*. Therefore, the presence in funerary inscriptions of social references would be the proof that the Venetic urban settlements witnessed the consolidation of an elite identified with the symbolic ownership of a horse.

In the first half of the last century, *ekupetaris* was known mainly from inscriptions on tombstones, often with depictions of a horse-drawn chariot, for which scholars proposed *ethymus* as related to 'stone' or' horse' in the physical sense. The later discovery of similar

inscriptions on metal artifacts has compromised the link to the burial stones. We refer, here, to previous publications for a historical review of interpretations (e.g., Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967; Zavaroni 2007; Olivotto 2016).

In Padua, the *ekupetaris* form is prevailing, while in Este we find *ekvopetaris*, traced back to *ekvo* = 'horse', as *ekvon* is attested on the base of an equestrian statue from the same Este.

Lejeune proposes a linguistic evolution from *ekvopetaris* to *ekupetaris*; unfortunately, there is no confirmation of this diachronic development and not even of a spatial continuity of diffusion. For example, *ekvopetaris* is attested in Este and Altino, while Padua, in an intermediate geographical position, used *eku*..., from the most ancient inscriptions up to those from Roman times. Lejeune suggests a segmentation of *ekupetaris* after *eku-*, which referred to 'horse', with a homophonic Venetic word *pot*, meaning 'lord'. He proposes an interpretation of *ekupetaris* as an adjective related to 'the lord of the horse', identifying the social status of knights (Lejeune 1971, 1974).

The discovery in Padua of an inscription with the word *enopetiario*, on a bowl from a non-funerary urban context, supports the hypothesis that the Veneti actually used compound names with -*petiar*-.

In most inscriptions, *ekupetaris* is referred to as the 'speaking object' that contains the inscription, *ego ekupetaris*, e.g. a tombstone, a river peddle, or a *situla*, a metal container for burial ashes. Therefore, while it might seem acceptable that a tomb defined itself "of equestrian rank", it is difficult to attribute the same meaning to a commemorative bowl. Zavaroni's recent interpretation of *ekupetaris* as a reference to a place of origin of a family might fit both cases, but leaves unsolved issues (Zavaroni 2007). The discovery, in 1996, of a bronze ritual container, a *lebete*, in the bed of the river Bacchiglione at Cervarese Santa Croce, not far from Padua, indeed, raises some additional questions. This ritual water container, possibly an award in athletic competitions, could have been a votive offer to the god(s) of the river. The cult of water bodies was relevant to the Veneti, and the habit to offer valuable objects to the related gods by throwing them in rivers or ponds was shared with the neighboring Celtic populations (Brunaux 2016).

On a side of the *lebete* we can read the following inscription (Bianchin Citton and Malnati 2001):

vhrema.i..s.to.i.ka.i.tiiariio.i..e.kupetaφo.s.

fremaistoi kaitiarioi ekupetabos

The possible interpretations of this are:

- a binomial formula in the dative case, indicating the person to whom the votive offer was made, and *ekupetabos* as a singular or plural nominative of the executor; we would interpret it in this case as follows: "to *Fremaisto Kaitiario*, the *ekupetabos* (offered)";
- the names of two persons, bound by asyndeta, followed by a plural noun, a dative in -*bos* as an apposition of the previous names. Therefore: "(this is) for the *ekupetas Fremaisto* and *Kaitiario*";
- the binomial name of a person and the deities receiving the offer: "from *Fremaisto Kaitiario*, to the (divine) *ekupetas*".

Regardless of the chosen option, the word **ekupet-* is, indeed, a lexical item in itself, and *ekupetaris* should be an adjective ending with -*aris*.

The prevailing interpretation of *ekupetabos* as related to the concept of social position, *equitalis*, is compatible only with the first two solutions, while the explanation by Zavaroni is consistent with the third, although it would give the text the following meaning: "To domestic deities", as in the Latin expression "to the *Lares Compitales*". This does not match well with a public ritual context (and a valuable offer in a sanctuary).

We propose, therefore, that, in *ekvopetaris*, the reference to 'horse' is not original and at most is only an interpretation following the introduction of the word in a funerary context.

We observed that there is a remarkable affinity between the word **ekupet-* with *a3-ku-pi-ti-jo*, a proper noun attested in the Linear B (Mycenaean Greek) text on a table from Knossos, Crete, from the Mycenaean period (Ventris and Chadwick 1973, p. 136; Getty Publications 2018, p. 63).

Since the time of the Egyptian New Empire, in the 16th–11th century BC, both the capital of the Egyptian kingdom, Memphis, and the entire kingdom were called, in Semitic, *Hi ku ptah*, a compound word meaning 'house of the *ka* of the god *Ptah*'; *ka* is the vital essence of an individual, according to the ancient Egyptian religion.

In texts from Ugarit dating back to the 14th–12th century BC, we find a possibly corresponding name, *Hikupta*. Furthermore, in the *Odyssey*, *Aigyptios* is a proper noun. The voicing of the velar consonant has changed /k/ into /g/ in Greek, but probably not in Venetic.

Since the Bronze Age, and at least until the Roman Empire, the Egyptians were known in the Mediterranean for their sophisticated funerary rituals—in that sense, 'Egyptian' could have assumed, over time, a semantic specialization connected with the meaning of 'ritual linked to the cult of the dead'.

The possibility of the diffusion of Egyptian cultural elements in Northern Italy between the 6th and 1st centuries BC, when the Venetic script developed, can be supported with some indirect evidence. The Greeks, who knew Egypt well, were active in *emporia* of the Northern Adriatic, such as Adria and Spina. In particular, Greek culture underwent, in the 7th century BC, the transformative phenomena of the so-called 'Orientalizing era', a cultural period with strong contributions from the Middle East. As a consequence of this, Greece saw the spread of bronzes of *kouroi*, statues of male figures with arms straight on their sides, fists closed, and left legs slightly advanced, which was clear evidence of Egyptian artistic influence (Segalerba 2023).

The provenance of priestesses from Egypt in the shape of doves, as told in the legend of the foundation of the ancient sanctuary of Dodona in Epirus, is further evidence of the religious influence of Egypt on Greece and neighboring areas. Finally, the Greek mystery cults, both the Eleusinian ones inspired by Demeter and Kore, and the Dionysian ones, have strong similarities with the Egyptian mythology of Isis and Osiris.

Mystery cults similar to the ones which developed in Greece were possibly practiced by the Veneti. It is plausible to deduce this from numerous clues:

- the egg-shaped bowls with inscriptions, symbols of the rebirth of the soul, similar to the egg-shaped stone markers used in the Etruscan necropolis of Kainua;
- the symbol of the key, findable on a funerary stone and on a bowl (Martini Chieco Bianchi and Prosdocimi 1969). The stele from Ca' Oddo shows an image representing a key and other signs, one similar to an eye; this might refer to the secret nature of mystery rituals and to the commitment of the adepts not to reveal what they saw while performing and/or attending them. In addition, the text of this stele bears the form *eppetaris (ego)*, very similar to *epopteia*, meaning the mystery ceremony in itself and the highest degree of initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries;
- the Venetic inscription Pa10 (Pellegrini and Prosdocimi 1967), which contains the text *mustai*, on an Alpine porphyry pebble. *Mustai* is considered the name, in the dative case, of the figure to which the offer is made; this word is connected with the Greek word *mystes* (μύστης), indicating an adept introduced to the mystery cults.

It is conceivable, therefore, that elements inspired to the Egyptian religion were introduced in Italy by the Etruscans through the Tyrrhenian ports, possibly with the mediation of Phoenician merchants, and by the Greeks through the ports in the northern Adriatic. Evidence of the diffusion of 'Orientalizing' objects in the Veneto region is provided by archaeology: in a female tomb from Este dating back to the 7th century BC, a female funerary kit with faience figurines of Egyptian inspiration was found (Capuis 1993, p. 148). Similar figurines of Egyptian inspiration were discovered in tombs of women from the 7th century BC in southern Etruria, near the town of Narce in the territory of the Faliscan tribes (De Brolli 2012).

The Egyptian faience, material used to realize valuable items of craftsmanship with bright colors, in Narce's tomb was placed next to objects in amber, ivory, and glass paste. The medical properties attributed to amber by the ancients and the religious symbolism of Egyptian figurines, along with other Etruscan ritual symbols from the tomb offers, indicate the fact that those ornaments had an aesthetic value due to their colors and, in addition, a magical and apotropaic meaning. It is important to highlight the fact that most of the amber found in proto-historic Italy came from the Baltic areas and was prevalently imported and traded by the Veneti (Capuis 1993). This new hypothesis, according to which the *ekupetaris* attested in Paduan inscriptions is a 'cultured' reference to Egyptian funerary rituals, implies the diffusion among the Veneti of Eastern cultural concepts, which were well known in the contemporary Greek world.

As for the form *ekvopetaris*, from Este and Altino, we suggest that the reference to the 'horse' might have intervened as a later etymological explanation, with the additional meaning of 'lord of the horse'. However, while so far the horse has always been intended as a real animal or as a valuable asset in a prestigious social class, we believe that the attestation of the term *ekvopetaris* in funerary and votive contexts should connect the notion of 'horse' with its religious symbolic role. Indeed, the representation in many Venetic stelae of images with horses is not realistic, in general, but symbolic. Death has always been configured as a rite and/or stage of passage, and the cart in the images would indicate the journey, while the horse would signify that the journey itself is to the underworld. Actually, the horse is a chthonic creature *par excellence* (and a psychopomp, ψυχοπομπός, 'guide of souls to the place of the dead'), especially in the Celtic tradition (Ferrari 2022).

The meaning of the horse can be understood through some evidence from Greek literature: in the archaic Greek world, the horse was sacred to Poseidon. We find evidence of this, for example, in the *Homeric Hymns*, lyric texts from the 7th–6th century BC, slightly before the time of the Venetic inscriptions (Càssola 1994). One of the epithets of Poseidon was 'horse tamer', ἵππων δμητῆρ, and he was the deity ruling on all waters: seas, rivers, and springs. Another epithet of Poseidon, 'earth shaker', γαίης κινητῆρα, implied a belief according to which earthquakes were caused by the movement of underground water. The animal sacred to Poseidon was the horse, which inherited his divine features and was a symbol of the water that flows from the springs (Càssola 1994). Living at the bottom of the sea, and ruling from there, Poseidon was considered an infernal deity, associated with chthonic figures of archaic mythology. This association was also extended to his sacred animal, the horse.

The Venetic sanctuary of San Pietro Montagnon is located just outside Padua, near thermal springs; the discovery of numerous bronze horses as votive offerings there, can be associated with this link between the figure of the horse and the notion of 'flowing water'.

Even in the Celtic context the horse had a specific religious value, being the most important of the sacrificial animals, followed by the ox, the pig, and the sheep. According to the Celts, a population very focused on religion ("*admodum dedita religionibus*", Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, VI 16-18), the presence of horses and equestrian objects in burials represented a ritual offering to the deity that was in charge of welcoming the deceased, rather than a symbol of social status. The Celtic goddess Epona, in the Roman era, was represented by a horse and was closely related to the underworld.

The horse, actually, was associated with religion since Prehistoric times up to the Christian era in Europe; Celts, Germanic tribes, and Etruscans were looking for auspices from their horses. It is the subject of a pluriannual debate about the role of the tombs hosting many horses, whether they had a juridical and social meaning or a religious value (Wagner 2005; Ferrari 2022).

The Venetic formula 'lord of (the) horses' could, therefore, represent an epithet of the infernal gods, and the text of the *lebete* from Cervarese would be, according to this line of interpretation, translatable as "the offer from *Fremaisto Kaitiario* to the infernal gods". A similar structure, with the deities' names in a plural dative case, is found in inscriptions from Auronzo di Cadore, e.g.,

]o.m.ma.is.terato.r.φos. fo.u.vatole.r. \ \ S ⎮ ⎮>

don]om Maisteratorbos Fouva toler (Gangemi 2003)

Gangemi did not record the final part of the text; we propose that the relevant symbols are *IIS IR*, meaning *20 − 2 IR = 18 iores, or 10 − 2 = 8 iores.* If confirmed, this interpretation would suggest that the *s* was widespread in other sites of the Alps and that the *iores* form for 'years' was not limited to Este.

From epigraphic evidence we know that inscriptions from sanctuaries sometimes show lexical differences related to the origins of the person who required a votive offer.

Another inscription from Auronzo, attesting *maisteratorbos* and with a structure very similar to the inscription from Cervarese, is as follows:

turicotriticonico.smai.s.terato.r.φos.

Turijo Tritijonijos Maisteratorbos (Gangemi 2003)

According to the hypothesis so far proposed, *ekvopetaris* would indicate objects related to rituals for infernal deities and to the underworld. Hence, it would be reasonable to think that, in some inscriptions, the 'talking' tombstone might say something similar to *ego ekvopetaris*, "I am something of the underworld", in relation to funerary rituals.

Expanding the horizons, Greek Epigraphy shows that votive inscriptions and sepulchral epigraphs have several characteristic elements, which are common to many Venetic inscriptions. In particular, these include the following:

- Greek funerary epigraphs bear the name of the deceased in the nominative or dative case;
- they often end with a reference to infernal gods, *θεοίς καταχτνιοις, Θ-Κ*, equivalent to the Latin formula *Dis Manibus*, abbreviated to *DM* (Guarducci 2005, 1969).

Greek votive inscriptions may contain the following:

- the name of the dedicator(s), in nominative case;
- a verb of offer, similar to Venetic *dono* or *tular*;
- the name of the deity, in dative case;
- a causal or modal complement, e.g., *doron* = 'as a gift', similar to Venetic *u donom*;
- the name of the person to whom the offer is dedicated, in accusative or dative cases;
- some elements to indicate a date;
- an implicit or explicit message such as "(I am a) sacred object", *ιερόν* (*ieron*) = 'sacred' (Guarducci 1969).

Similar to the Venetic 'talking' inscriptions, in archaic Greece, we can observe the *cliché* of 'talking' objects, according to a model that probably dates back to Prehistory and attributes characteristics of living creatures to the items containing inscriptions. Following this pattern, since the Neolithic and up to early historical times, an artifact, for example, a *menhir*, would have housed a deity and would have been identified with the deity itself. Similarly, the Greeks identified a god or goddess with the statue(s) that represented them—indeed, stealing the statue(s) was equivalent to the kidnapping of the deity.

Due to these similarities with Greek Epigraphy, it is reasonable to postulate that *ekupetaris* might have a meaning connected with the sacred sphere, similar to the Greek *ieron*, and not only a meaning connected with social rank. The word could also have become, over time and with cultural evolution, polysemantic.

5. Conclusions

Our interpretations of some votive inscriptions from the sanctuary of Lagole aim to trigger a possibly fertile debate on those epigraphic documents and a better understanding of parts of those texts so far considered unreadable or directly neglected. If confirmed, they could indicate that those epigraphs contain dates, indications of human ages, and invocations to deities. The use of numbers and their representation with symbols, probably

due to an Etruscan influence, demonstrate the tendency to measure the time of daily life in days and months, and in years inherently in the longer time-span of human existence. We analyzed the word meaning 'years', i*ores* and *ores*, both in the standard and contracted forms *ir* and o*r*. The possible use of numbering systems with base-twenty was highlighted for the mountainous area of Cadore, with a plausible influence of the Celts. Alternatively, two symbols may converge to indicate the value of '10', *X* and *S*. We also provided an original interpretation for the word *ekupetaris*. It is believed that the Venetic society in the Iron Age was quite similar to the Celtic and Etruscan civilizations. Therefore, in the funerary context of the inscriptions, we might expect a prevailing religious meaning of *ekupetaris*, compatible with Greek *ieron* and Etruscan *suthina*, rather than a reference to the social role of the deceased.

A connection with the ritual traditions of the Egyptian underworld is proposed for at least a document from Padua. This would imply, naturally, not a direct contact with Egypt, but the loan of a word (and related symbolic elements/values) from archaic Greek, although this could be extremely difficult to ascertain and prove in the absence of more direct evidence (therefore, we would like to highlight the fact that this is a proposal that we advance eminently at the level of hypothesis, to encourage more research in this direction). The variant *ekvopetaris* may include a reference to 'horse' and could open a wide debate on the role of the horse itself in tombs of Italic peoples and ancient European populations in general.

We suggest that the horse, in ancient sacred contexts, in addition to its value as a symbol of social prestige and/or his features of being a beautiful and fast animal, took on a religious symbolic connotation, representing the animal *par excellence* of the underworld.

Through a further comparison with Greek Epigraphy, we postulated the presence in the inscriptions of possible invocations to the gods, expressed with abbreviations at the end of some texts.

Finally, we have highlighted the possible attestations of numbers in various texts and the symbolism used to represent them, with the postulation that a base-twenty numerical system coexisted with the more diffused base-ten one in the specific historical and cultural context of the inscriptions.

Further studies on numerical representation in epigraphy, in this context, and also considering the Raetian inscriptions, would be very welcome and definitely valuable.

In general, in any case, an overall evidence of cultural contacts among the Veneti, Etruscans, Celts, and Greeks is undeniable. That can justify a comparison of the contents of the inscriptions we analyze through a multi-disciplinary approach, which can offer support to a better and unbiased understanding of fragmentary texts in cases where a linguistic investigation alone does not provide scholars with definitive solutions.

Our hope is that our paper can partly fill (at least at the level of analytical proposal) a gap in current research and, as mentioned, trigger a useful discussion aimed at a more comprehensive and exact assessment of the contents of the Venetic inscriptions. This goes hand in hand with the goal of the completion and enhancement of traditional interpretations which need to be improved, confirmed, or disproved, and of the advancement in the study of these epigraphs through the honest sharing of knowledge and exhaustive comparative approaches.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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